

# We were aground more than we were afloat

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I was the only one who actually fell in, but I am getting ahead of myself. It all began in 1965 when we went to England for a year. My father had a sabbatical and a Guggenheim fellowship, so we packed ourselves off to England for a year. My father to finish Omensetter's Luck and my sister, brother and I to be English school children.

We crossed on the *S.S. France*, the newest and grandest ship of the French Line. Entering service in 1962 the *France* made regular transatlantic crossings from Le Havre to New York and from New York to Southampton. At over 1000 feet long she was at the time the longest passenger ship ever built. She had her own *patisserie*, which turned out 2000 croissants every morning. I remember being amazed by the size of the ship. It even had a swimming pool. We were in tourist class but I was stunned by the luxury of it all. The food was excellent, with multi-course French meals for both lunch and dinner although I remember my parent's complaining about the wine. The wine although plentiful was Algerian and apparently bad. In first class the wine was of course French. Children eat separately from the adults in the children's dining room a custom that I loathed. As an adult my views on this custom have evolved. I did not know it, or even think about it but the era of grand passenger ships was coming to a close. Rising fuel costs, cheaper fares and fewer people with the time to spend six days on a transatlantic crossing doomed the great liners. The *France* turned out to be the last dedicated passenger liner ever built. In 1973 the price of oil jumped from \$3 to \$12 and in 1974 the SS French was withdrawn from service. In 1979 she was sold to the Norwegian Caribbean Line to be converted to a cruise ship and rechristened the Norway. In 2005 she was sold for scrap.

My parents had rented a house in the small village of Chorleywood, which is about 20 miles northwest of London. Chorleywood is a small village with a population of 6814 in 2001. It would have been smaller in 1965. Chorleywood was first settled in the Paleolithic Age. The attraction was presumably the abundant supply of flint. It is said that it is not uncommon to find Paleolithic and Neolithic stone tools in the fields and woods in the area. As a small boy I was eager to find a stone-age implement but I never did. The house that we rented was close to a large wooded green space called the Chorleywood Commons and all three of us children spent considerable time playing in it. It was large enough so that once, early on, I got lost in it and had to be found by my father. In its past Chorleywood was known for its tolerant nonconformist ways. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century it offered sanctuary to Quakers. The Pennsylvania Colony was settled with Quakers from Chorleywood and the surrounding area.

Chorleywood's real claim to fame or perhaps infamy is bread, bad bread. In 1961 the British Baking Industries Research Association based in Chorleywood invented what is now called the Chorleywood Bread Process or CBP for short. Prior to 1961 most bread in England was made with imported wheat. English wheat was soft wheat, which means that it is low in protein. By contrast most American wheat is hard wheat with high protein content. One can make excellent bread from low protein flour and in the old days the English did, but it requires careful handling and extending rising times. As a result

most bread in England was baked with flour imported from Canada or the United States. The Chorleywood Bread Process changed that. By mixing the dough under partial vacuum and with vigorous mechanical agitation it was possible with the addition of lots of yeast and various chemicals to produce bread from domestic flour that needed almost no rising time. The bread was soft, snow white and cheap. It had a shelf life that was twice that of the old bread. And it was bad, tasteless bread. In the words of one critic "it tasted like cotton". In her history of English bread Elizabeth David refers to it as the "notorious Chorleywood Bread Process". The Chorleywood Bread Process was intended to help small bakers since they could use cheaper domestic wheat but it was easy to scale to large volumes and quickly adopted by large bakers. Thousands of small bakeries soon went out of business, leaving the business dominated by a few large companies. Today the Chorleywood Bread Process is used in 80% of all bread in England. And not just England but India, Nigeria, Australia and host of smaller countries' all use the CBP.

I was eleven at the time so I went to grammar school. Of course I had not taken the Eleven Plus exam, which at the time determined the fate of English school children at the tender age of 10. Those that passed went on to grammar school and frequently on to university while those that failed went to a technical school or what was known as a modern secondary school where they faced severely limited educational opportunities. The passing rate for the Eleven Plus was only 25%. I am sure I would have failed it. Fortunately as a scruffy and presumptively ill-educated American I did not have to take the Eleven Plus and after the headmaster interviewed both my parent's and me, I was admitted to Rickmansworth grammar school. Only, I am sure because it was only for a year and thus I would never sully the reputation of Ricky grammar by graduating from it. In 1969 Rickmansworth grammar school ceased to be academically selective and become what the English call fully comprehensive, meaning that they took anyone. This had, I believe more to do with changes in the laws governing school funding than their mistake in admitting me.

My brother Robert and sister Susan went to the Russell School, a local primary school. My sister was in the first form and my brother in the fifth form, the equivalent of first and fifth grades in the US.

I may have been a scruffy American but I was soon a uniformed one. One of my mother's first tasks was to buy school uniforms for all of us. As a first form student I wore short pants, a gray shirt, white undershirt, sandals, a maroon tie, green blazer with the Rickmansworth crest on it and a hat, which also had the crest on it. This is still the required uniform for first formers.

It was the undershirt along with knickers that was my sister's undoing. She had a uniform as well and although my mother did not know it she was supposed to wear a white undershirt under her dress. When gym rolled around on the first week the

students were instructed to strip down to their underpants and undershirts for the hours activity, a run through town. Susan had no undershirt and she had the wrong kind of knickers. On gym days she was supposed to have a pair of deep leaf green knickers just like all the other girls had. But she didn't and she was not excused. So, she ended up running through town topless, in white knickers, and scarred for life. Unlike Rickmansworth Grammar where the school uniform is the same today as it was in 1965 the Russell School no longer requires uniforms.

My brother and sister walked to school but Ricky Grammar was about four miles away so I had a half-mile walk to the train station and then after the train had to change to a bus with a short walk after that. During the winter months I left home in the dark and returned home in the dark.

The weather was immaterial, first formers at Ricky grammar wore short pants and sandals regardless of how cold or wet it might be. Long pants and close-toed shoes were reserved for those in the second and higher forms.

Ricky grammar was nothing like the American elementary school that I had just left. It was very hierarchical and as a first former I was at the bottom. I and the other first formers soon learned to make ourselves scarce anytime we were not in class, since otherwise a fifth or sixth former was likely to decide that there was trash to be picked-up or some other task that would build a first former's character. The older boys had been bossed around when they were first formers and they damn well were not going to pass up the opportunity for revenge. Even if the revenge was on a different set of boys. I do not know if life was really better for the second formers but we first formers imagined that it was.

Although Rickmansworth grammar was not a religious school, we had to attend assembly and chapel everyday. Assembly was first thing in the morning and not overly religious, consisting mostly of announcements and pleas from the headmaster to refrain from behavior that might tarnish the reputation of Rickmansworth grammar. Although the school was not very old having open in 1956 the headmaster made it sound as if the school had centuries of history and we, we, were the first group in the history of the school to have committed whatever the transgression at hand was. Daily chapel was mandatory, Church of England of course and I was always bored stiff. But then so were all the other students. Ricky grammar was co-educational with about 900 students total. There must have been at least some girls in my form but I have no memory of them. Had I been a year older I would have paid more attention.

English school food in the mid-sixty's was just what you would imagine. Maybe worse, it depends on the depth of your imagination. Lunch in the cafeteria was mandatory; you were not allowed to bring your lunch. The vegetables were largely canned, the potatoes instant and the meat overcooked, which may have been for the best. We were served many of the classics that have for so long given English food a bad name: steak and kidney pie, bangers and mash, bubble and squeak, a joint and three veg and

of course tapioca pudding. For those of you lucky enough to be unfamiliar with these dishes bubble and squeak is a method of using up leftovers. Leftover vegetables are fried and as one recipe says “glued together” with leftover mashed potatoes. If you have any leftover meat you could fry that up as well. Glue would be an accurate description of the mashed potatoes at the school. These dishes don’t have to be bad; it is possible these days to spend a considerable sum for upscale versions in trendy London restaurants but at Ricky grammar, poor ingredients combined with lousy execution yielded the predictable result. The food at the Russell School where my brother and sister were was no better; my sister described it as vile. And my brother who as an upperclassman at the Russell school, was the head server at my sister’s table would not let her leave the table until she had eaten everything on her plate.

Ricky grammar was different academically as well. As a first former I took French, English history, Chemistry, Algebra, Music, Religion and Field. Field being the English equivalent of gym. A much more rigorous curriculum than I would have had as an American sixth grader even in my old elementary school where most of the students were Purdue brats.

And the standards at Rickmansworth were high, or at least they seemed high to me. I remember getting an early assignment back, I cannot recall in which subject, with the comment “This work might be acceptable by American standards but it is certainly not by Rickmansworth grammar standards”. Oddly one of the subjects I was best at was religion. Religion classes were mandatory at Ricky grammar. I had grown up in an atheist household and was always bored stiff by chapel. I had never read the bible and this you might think would be a disadvantage in religion class. But it wasn’t. My classmates had read the bible and thus never did the assigned reading figuring that they already knew the material. I on the other hand did not have clue and so I at least did do the assigned reading although I do not think I did much else. So I wasn’t a very good student in religion class but I was better than my classmates and that was what counted.

Music class was a different story. I was used to American music classes. The teacher plays the piano, the students sing, in my case badly, and no one takes the class too seriously. At some point in your musical education, if one can call it that, a half-hearted attempt is made to teach you how to play a plastic recorder. Things were very different at Ricky grammar and I was slow to pickup on this. There was no singing while the teacher played the piano; we were expected to learn to play the violin. Well I did not take it very seriously. First of all, I had when I was younger briefly played the violin. I was terrible, not merely bad you understand but terrible. It was I am sure a happy day in my violin teacher’s life when I quit. I suspect my whole family was happy since I remember being fairly good about practicing. I may have been terrible but at least I had played before so at the beginning I was way ahead of the rest of the class. But I did nothing, at least nothing outside of class and I don’t think I paid much attention in class. I soon started to fall behind the class and as the year wore on I fell further and further behind. Since most of the music was played as group I don’t think the teacher realized

how far behind I was falling. Or, maybe he just wrote me off as hopeless. The rest of the students and more importantly the teacher seemed to take the whole exercise more seriously than I did but somehow I failed to notice this. There had been mention of a solo that was expected of each of us at the end of the year but I managed to put that out of my mind. Hell it was just music class. The sinking feeling hit with about two weeks left in the school year, way too late to recover. The solo loomed over me. I was totally screwed. Through no one's fault but mine, which only made it worse. The piece, which most of us, had been practicing all year was a couple of minutes long. We had the sheet music but I had forgotten how to read music and had not bothered to relearn that skill. So the sheet music was worthless to me. What could I do, when my turn came I got up and improvised for a couple of minutes, it seemed much longer, and sat down. The teacher glared at me, "That's nice, what was it" he sneered. I had no reply.

The rest of my classes went better; after all they could hardly have gone worse. French was not a success, I am not good at languages, a trait I share with my father, but not my mother and sister both of whom are good linguists. But I did pay attention in French and I muddled through with the English equivalent of the gentleman's C. Chemistry was easy once I adjusted to the English standards and I don't remember any trouble with algebra or history. I do remember that in year of English history we only got to 1066 and the battle of Hastings.

Field as gym class was known had it's own difficulties. At home in the United States I had been a poor but not completely hopeless athlete. But that was back home with games that I had grown up playing. Like music class Field was taken somewhat more seriously in England than in the United States. We had it twice a week for about 2 hours at a time as the last class in the afternoon. Mostly we played soccer, known of course as football or rugby neither of which I had ever played before. Now I was a completely hopeless athlete. We played outside in almost all weather. Unless, it was so wet that teacher was afraid we might damage the playing fields and although we did not count, the playing fields were precious. In that case we ran cross-country. Oddly enough, although it was almost always cold and rainy when we ran I didn't mind it. For one thing I was not playing soccer or rugby against people who had played for years and on the other hand much to my amazement I was pretty good at cross country routinely finishing first, often by a considerable margin. I did have an advantage, Field was the last class of the day and you could leave after you finished. I discovered that if I ran hard I could just make the early train and thus get home an hour early. So, I was more motivated than my classmates most of whom did not take the train.

You might think that having discovered that I was pretty good at cross country I would capitalize on this and go out for cross country in junior high school when I returned to the United States, thus improving my status and social standing. But I did not. I did not run again until I finished graduate school and I have always regretted this.

If the weather was so bad that the gym teacher was afraid that running outside might not be safe we stayed indoors and oiled the upperclassmen's cricket bats. Carefully rubbing them down with linseed oil. First formers did not play cricket, only the upperclassman did, and today I still do not understand cricket at all. But that was OK because as first formers we played softball in the spring. And now I was a god. My classmates had never played softball; it wasn't played in primary school. I was a pretty mediocre player by American standards but I played little league for a couple of years and by English schoolboy standards I was Babe Ruth. I could hit the ball in the rare event that it was over the plate and once you put the ball into play you were almost certain to reach at least first base. As for pitching if you could get the ball over the plate you were an ace. It was toward the end of the year but softball was the beginning of my social acceptance at Ricky Grammar. Well, that and the fight.

My sister had been popular at the Russell School from the beginning. She was seen as an exotic and fascinating American girl. My brother I think was mostly just glad that he, unlike his classmates was not about to take a test that would determine his future. I was a Yank. I don't know if the difference was because my classmates were older or because of my flawed personality. I will go with age. Yank was not a term of endearment. Softball greatly enhanced my social status, as did the fight. It was the only schoolyard fight I ever had and it was just like the movies. Other boys gathered around us in a circle, urging us on. One particular bully had tormented me all year. I don't remember the precipitating incident but now there seemed to be no way to avoid a fight. I certainly didn't want to fight and in retrospect I am sure that my opponent did not want to either. But surrounded by boys yelling "fight, fight" there seemed little choice. This was where the normally strict discipline of Ricky grammar broke down. Outside of the classroom, the older boys normally enforced discipline among the lower forms in a capricious and arbitrary manner. But, they liked a fight as much as the next boy and so they gathered around hoping no doubt for blood. In the end it was anticlimactic, I threw the first and only punch of the fight. It wasn't much of a punch, a mild shot to the stomach that I don't think would have fazed my brother but it ended the fight. I never had trouble with the bully again and I was suddenly more popular, proving that violence does solve some things.

In fact I was popular enough to be elected captain of my form. I should have looked into this more closely before saying yes since it turned out that the major duty of the form captain, indeed I believe the only duty, was to apologize for the form when the form had something wrong. Rickmansworth grammar was a big believer in collective apologies.

In the early spring our long time family friend Allen who was known as Sonny came to visit for a month. My parents wanted to pick Sonny, who was terrified of flying, up at the airport. We had no car and upon investigation it turned out that we could hire a chauffeured Rolls Royce for not much more than a taxi would cost. So we picked Sony up in an old but impeccably maintained Rolls. I think he was suitably impressed.

After Sonny arrived we took a number of side trips. There was a trip to Scotland about which I remember little except for the cold. From the perspective of us children we simply trudged from one old church or castle to the next. None of which we had much interest in. And we did this in the snow, in short pants, sandals and inadequate coats. At night we stayed in private lodging which usually included dinner and breakfast the next morning. And they were cold. I remember the proprietress of one establishment remarking that since it was a lovely evening she thought we would eat on the porch. Apparently anything slightly above freezing qualified as lovely. So we sat outside on the porch and watched our tomato soup congeal. There was no central heating in most of the places we stayed. Heat was provided by an inadequate coal fire or by that peculiar British tradition the schilling meter. For those of you lucky enough not have encountered one, a shilling meter is a gas heater that runs for a while when you put a shilling in. Since times were hard the proprietors were always sparing with the shillings. At one of these places I remember the proprietress came in to the lodger's quarters and said "oh, isn't nice and lovely in here", "no" replied Sonny, "it's bloody cold". She left and breaking the rules Sonny threw more coal on the fire.

More promising, much more promising was the canal boat trip. My parent's had rented a canal boat and the plan was to spend a week cruising from Aylesbury to Oxford on the Grand Union and Oxford Canals, a trip of about 150 miles. I had always like boats, although this more of a theoretical position than a practical one since we were not a boating family. In fact the trip was entirely out of character for us. My family did not do things like this. We did not boat, hike, fish or camp. But now the six of us, for Sonny came along as well set out on a week's adventure. We got a quick lesson on the boat and a brief tutorial on operating locks from the rental agent and we were off. It was immediately apparent that the boat was a dog. Money was tight and I suspect that my parents had rented from the cheapest possible company. The boat was supposed to have a top speed of four miles an hour but it never did more than two. Underpowered, it steered poorly. My father is a man of many talents but small boat handling is not one of them and he never really got the hang of steering. There was a long lag between moving the tiller and any response from the boat so it was very easy to over correct causing the boat to veer off first in one direction and then in the other.

In fairness operating a canal boat was not nearly as easy as the rental agent had promised. The canals were narrow with just enough space for two standard size boats, known as narrow boats to squeeze by one another. The narrow boats were seven feet wide and between 30 and 60 feet long. Traffic on the canal moved in both directions and consisted of a few pleasure boats such as ours and some "working" boats. Commercial traffic on the canals was in steep decline by 1966 but it had not yet collapsed and "working" boats towing barges of coal and aggregate were still common. "Working boats had the right of way and pleasure boats such as ours were always to yield to a 'working' boat. The "working" boats were crewed by family members, the whole family living and working on the boat. The "working" boats were not fond of pleasure boats, which they considered a nuisance at best and more likely a dangerous menace. And they were

right. The first accident occurred shortly after we set off. The Grand Union canal is 137 miles long and has 166 locks so navigating locks is a common occurrence. Most of the locks were self-operated and although by the end of the trip we would be old hands at operating locks this was not true the first day. At around noon as we entered a lock going downstream my father decided that we should stop for lunch. In the lock! This in itself would have been bad enough, blocking a lock is an egregious breach of etiquette. Far worse was that while we enjoyed our lunch on the deck in the picturesque English countryside we left both lock valves open. If you are lucky when going downstream the lock will already be filled when you get there. In that case you can open the upstream gates, sail into the lock, close the upstream gate and drain the water from the lock. You can now open the downstream gate, sail out the lock and close the downstream gates behind you. If the lock is not filled you must first open the upstream lock valve and fill the lock, which will take 5-10 minutes. When the lock is filled you close the upstream valve open the gates and sail into the lock. We did not close the upstream valve and sat in the lock with both the upstream and downstream valves open. The result was a steady stream of water flowing downstream but we were oblivious to that. Until a very angry "working" boat owner showed up screaming at us. We were draining the water out of the section of the canal between the lock we were in and the next upstream lock. His boat was aground and about to capsize. Cursing he closed the lock valves and we slunk off downstream. I am sure that a family member from his boat had to walk upstream to the next lock and let more water into the downstream section to refloat the boat. We got better at locks after that, but although Sonny and I mastered the art of steering the boat, my father never did and we often drunkenly weaved from bank to bank.

It was early spring and in England that means cold and wet. And we were. It soon became apparent that our boat had flaws that extended beyond steering badly. There was no heat to speak of and water leaked into the boat when it rained. The worst of the leaks was right above my bed and I spent the entire trip with a damp mattress and sheets. As a hot treat my mother served hot soup each morning around ten. The soup was of course canned but we thought it delicious. When we returned to Chorleywood everyone thought we should have some of that delicious soup but it turned out that the soup was only good when you were cold and wet. Sort of like the hot Jell-O, as you will remember.

Since the canal was narrow and channelized you might think it would be impossible to run aground. You would be wrong. The canal was sometimes shallower along the bank than in the middle so that if you got the boat sidewise in the canal you could run aground, and we did on several occasions. When that happens the only solution was to stand on the towpath and push the boat off with the boathook. This was usually my job and normally a push did the job and that was that. However once when we were more firmly aground than usual I really leaned into it. Suddenly the boat moved with predictable results. I face planted into the canal, going completely under water. This was not really a big deal and I don't think I even swallowed any water, certainly not much but

my mother was convinced that I was in grave danger. It was just a matter of what got me first, the toxic chemical waste in the canal or the deadly pathogens. Maybe the toxic chemicals kept the pathogens down but in any event I never suffered any ill effects. In my mother's defense I'm sure the canal was filthy but from the perspective of a 12 year old her concerns seemed overblown.

You shouldn't think we were always aground, no sometimes we were not properly moored. One day all of us except for Sonny went ashore to buy food in one of the small villages alongside the canal. We tied the boat up and set off to buy food. Upon our return 30 minutes later or so we watched in horror as the boat floated off down the canal trailing its mooring lines. After much shouting Sonny emerged on deck his face still covered with shaving cream and starting the engine, steered the boat back to shore, a distance of all of four or five feet. I am not sure what my father would have done had Sonny not been aboard.

There were a number of low tunnels on the canal some of which were quite long. The roofs were only a few feet above the top of the boat and in the old days before engines the boats were "legged" through the tunnels. Normally donkeys would tow the boat but when a tunnel was encountered someone would take the donkeys around the tunnel and one or more crewmembers would lie on the roof of the boat and using their legs push the boat through the tunnel, which must have been hard work indeed. Our boat had a small windshield that could be folded down when you went through a tunnel. I think the windshield was mostly for looks since the cockpit of the boat was otherwise completely open but as we approached one of the tunnels my father forgot to fold down the windshield which was promptly sheared off by the stone roof of the tunnel resulting in a shower of broken glass from the windshield and a torrent of heartfelt and sincere swearing from my father. I wondered what the rental company would say about the windshield but I was smart enough to keep quiet.

The longest of the tunnels was the Saddington tunnel, which is a half-mile long. For 10 and 12 year old boys going through a long tunnel is an adventure and my brother asked my father if he could ride up in the bow of the boat while we went through the tunnel. My father readily agreed and Robert scampered off to the bow. About halfway through the tunnel my mother suddenly realized that she did not know where Robert was. I explained that he was up front. She was furious and worried that Robert would fall in and be run down by the boat. In the darkness of the tunnel no one would ever know until it was too late. Once the boat was in the tunnel it was very hard to move from the front to the back due to the low tunnel height and the darkness so there was little my mother could do except fume and worry. Robert did not fall overboard and with the impeccable logic of a 10-year boy explained that there was nothing to worry about since he had no intention of falling overboard.

We left the Grand Union canal and turned onto Oxford canal. This was the last leg of the trip, which would end at Oxford. It was the last leg for the boat as well which to give up

the ghost. The engine quit. The rental company sent out a mechanic who made repairs but they did not last. Soon the engine quit a second time and this time the rental company sent a towboat and we were towed to Oxford ending the trip on an inglorious note. We arrived in Oxford dirty, damp and ragged. My mother was ashamed to be walking around a respectable town like Oxford looking and smelling like we did. We were starting to look like the working boat families but trust me when I say we had not acquired their skills.

We spent the summer in France and Italy and returned to West Lafayette just in time for school to start. I didn't think that I had become an English schoolboy but on the first day, in Mrs. Meese's 7<sup>th</sup> grade history class and still in my English schoolboy sandals I was called upon. I rose, began my answer with Ma`am, ended my answer with Ma`am, and to riotous laughter sat down.